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The Summit of the Americas: A New Beginning for U.S. Policy in the Region

When the Western Hemisphere's 34 democratically elected leaders gather in Port of Spain on April 17 for the fifth Summit of the Americas, many of them will vividly recall the tense proceeding and unhappy outcome of the previous Summit in Mar del Plata, Argentina some three and one-half years ago. The discord reflected the continuing strains in U.S.-Latin American relations and divisive politics of the hemisphere generally. The distrust and division among the region's governments have persisted, and remain a challenge to the operations of the OAS and other inter-American institutions. There are concerns that they may end up buffeting this year's summit in Trinidad as well.

But there are also good reasons to anticipate a more productive meeting in Port of Spain.

First and most important, the United States today has a president that is almost universally liked and admired in Latin America and the Caribbean. Across the region Obama's election was enthusiastically welcomed, and viewed as a hopeful sign of the vitality of U.S. democracy. Latin Americans are making it clear that they now want a new and better relationship with the United States.

Second, the most troublesome issue for the earlier Summit—whether to resume the U.S.-backed hemispheric free trade negotiations—is no longer on the inter-American agenda. Instead, every country of the hemisphere is now coping with the global financial crisis. With shrinking exports, falling commodity prices, declining remittances, and diminished credit and investment, every Latin American and Caribbean country faces sluggish growth, rising unemployment, and deepening poverty. Although this "made in the USA" crisis has bred new resentment toward Washington, it also makes cooperation with the United States, as well as among the countries of the region, all the more important.

Third, the government of Trinidad and Tobago has invested heavily in making the Summit a success. The official Summit declaration, which has been discussed and debated for months among the participating governments, has been crafted to avoid confrontation. To be sure, the declaration is often bland, but it ably addresses several critical issues—environmental sustainability, energy security, and human prosperity—and could help set the stage for greater regional cooperation on different dimensions of these issues.

The spotlight in Port of Spain will clearly be on President Obama. At least three of the hemisphere's leaders—Brazil's Lula da Silva, Mexico's Felipe Calderon, and Canada's Stephen Harper—will have spoken privately with Obama prior to the Summit (and he may meet with Argentina's Christina Fernandez in London at the April meeting of G-20 group), and he will come to Trinidad with their views freshly in mind. Still, he will have a great deal to learn from the assembled presidents and prime ministers, who will surely seize the opportunity to tell the new U.S. president how they see political and economic developments in the region and globally, what they like and dislike about U.S. policies, and what they now want from the United States.

But what will be most important in Trinidad is what President Obama has to say. No one anticipates that the U.S. president, after only three months in office, will be ready to announce dramatic new directions or offer detailed policy proposals for U.S.-Latin American relations. He will, however, be expected to talk about his priorities and discuss his ideas about major inter-American challenges. The regional leaders will be concerned about style as well as substance. They will want to see a different tone and texture in the diplomacy of the new administration—and will be looking for signals of a more inclusive and cooperative approach to regional affairs and a greater respect for Latin American views. More than anything else, however, they will want to hear his thinking about concrete problems and opportunities.

The topic of greatest concern will be the global economic crisis—and whether and how U.S. policy responses will take Latin America's needs into account. It is not only that fixing the U.S. economy will moderate and shorten Latin America's ordeal. Washington can also help by resisting protectionist measures that would curb imports or overseas investment; by using its influence to encourage expanded resources and flexibility for the multilateral financial institutions; and by coordinating policy approaches with the region's governments. President Obama should reassure the Latin American leaders about the 'buy American' provisions of the stimulus package and express his support for expanded multilateral funding for the region's economies. He should also urge the region's governments to resist protectionist temptations and manage their economies responsibly.

The Latin American and Caribbean heads of state will expect Obama to be particularly well prepared to discuss financial and economic matters (since he has spent so much of his time on it from a U.S. domestic perspective and will have participated in the G-20 meeting two weeks earlier). But they will also be eager to hear about other issues. Cuba, organized crime, immigration, and trade are among the most significant.

- Every government in the hemisphere wants to know whether the Obama administration will find a way to end the United States' policy of isolating and sanctioning Cuba. This is an issue of huge symbolic importance. Justified or not, it will be regarded as a test of the United States' commitment to change in hemispheric affairs. What Obama says or doesn't say about the U.S. approach to Cuba is what will appear in headlines across the world. The U.S. president should also take the opportunity of the Summit to urge other governments, in their own way, to do what they can to advance the economic and political opening of Cuba.

- With the pandemic of criminal violence spreading across Latin America and the Caribbean, governments will also want to know whether the United States plans to expand its support for countries battling organized crime and drug trafficking. The United States has committed substantial aid for these purposes to Colombia and Mexico, and small amounts to countries in Central America and the Caribbean. The leaders of threatened nations will ask about the prospects of Washington developing and financing a broader a regional approach to fight crime and drugs. They will also want to know whether the new U.S. administration is prepared to review and rethink its decades-old anti-drug strategy that has irritated so many countries of Latin America and yielded such scant results. President Obama should consider supporting a genuinely multilateral and cooperative initiative to develop fresh ideas and strategies for dealing with illicit drugs and associated criminal activity.

- U.S. immigration policies are a first order concern for more than a dozen countries. Latin American leaders are aware of the bitter U.S. debates over immigration and know that reform may take time—but they are hoping to hear that the Obama administration will, at some point, actively pursue changes in immigration law. And they are hopeful that he will suspend construction of the wall or fence on the U.S.-Mexican border, and stop the raids and arrests targeting illegal immigrants.

- Trade initiatives are not a priority for either the United States or Latin America. But most of the region's governments want to hear that the new administration will start soon to work toward congressional ratification of the trade agreements that the United States negotiated with Colombia and Panama. That would reassure them that the United States is a reliable commercial partner. Most Latin American countries, and many in the U.S. Congress, would also applaud Washington's reinstating Bolivia's trade preferences, which were suspended when the U.S. ambassador and U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency personnel were expelled from the country. The suspension was widely viewed as too harsh a penalty.

- The leaders of the dozen English-speaking Caribbean nations, who have long felt their interests ignored and belittled by the United States, will expect some special consideration given that this is the first hemispheric Summit ever held in their territory. President Obama should, at a minimum, make clear that he understands the depth of the economic and security problems that are confronting most Caribbean countries. Haiti, the only failed or failing state in the hemisphere--and the most destitute–should also get special attention.

- How the Obama administrations responds to the challenge posed by Venezuela and its several regional allies is of deep concern to the assembled leaders. There is little expectation that much can be done about this at the Summit, but most of the regional leaders would welcome a statement that the United States is prepared to maintain good relations with governments representing a great diversity of political perspectives. .

- President Obama should also come prepared to talk about U.S. global policies. The Latin American and Caribbean leaders have a keen interest in Washington's plans regarding the Israeli-Palestine conflict, withdrawal from Iraq, the closing of Guantanamo, the war in Afghanistan, and U.S. relations with such countries as Iran, China, and Russia. They are hoping to learn that the United States no longer divides the world into friends and adversaries—and is now prepared to pursue more multilateral and conciliatory approaches in the hemisphere and beyond.

For most of the assembled governments, the results and impressions that emerge from informal exchanges among the U.S., Latin American, Caribbean, and Canadian leaders will be more important than the formal proceedings or the meeting's final declaration in determining the value of the Summit. Most attention will be on President Obama. The other governments will use the occasion, first, to judge whether the new U.S. president will take Latin American and Caribbean interests into account as he struggles to repair the U.S. economy. Second, they will want to assess whether the Obama administration is likely to adjust its regional policies and goals so they (1) reflect the profound political and economic changes that have taken place in Latin America and the Caribbean, (2) recognize the diminished ability of the United States to exert authority and determine outcomes in the region, and (3) build toward a more cooperative and inclusive relationship with the rest of the hemisphere.

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Note: My testimony today draws heavily on the 2009 Report of the Inter-American Dialogue—A Second Chance: US Policy in the Americas—which is attached for the record. Just released yesterday, the Dialogue's report sets forth a ten-point agenda with concrete recommendations for US foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere. It emphasizes that, in the coming period, the highest priority challenge for the United States and every other country in the Americas will be the slumping world economy and its social and political fallout.